

Down Time

by northernexposure

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****A/N:**** This was originally posted in spring 2014, the first of several 'Ayala'-oriented stories that concluded with 'Onwards'. The original was not beta read and this still hasn't been, although I've tidied up a few bits and pieces that always annoyed me. Overall, I think this series is probably my favourite of my J/C stories, although I'm not going to re-post 'Last Words', which was a bit pants.

****Original A/N:**** Chakotay spends some time with an old friend. A tiny little present for MissyHissy3.

* * *

><p>The rock face wasn't the most difficult Chakotay had ever climbed, but it wasn't far off. It was a beautiful spring day in Yosemite, California, and the afternoon sun would have been pleasant if not for the fact that he'd already worked up quite a sweat. As a result his t-shirt was wet through and by his calculations they weren't even half way into the ascent.<p>

Chakotay paused for a moment before finding his next grip. His muscles were aching â€" a symptom of too little of the right kind of exercise for too long â€" and he momentarily wished it hadn't been Ayala's turn to choose today's excursion. Still, fair was fair and it had been, so he was trying to bear his friend's choice to scale Half Dome with good grace. Actually, when he wasn't thinking about just how badly he was going to hurt for the next few days, Chakotay was quite enjoying himself. It had been far too long since he'd taken

this kind of time out. Above and behind him, the blue sky was almost completely devoid of clouds, an azure expanse punctuated only by the flight of birds, and Ayala had assured him that the view when they reached the top would be more than worth the effort of the climb. It was already a very different vista to the one Chakotay was used to on the bridge of *_Voyager_*. The holodeck was even doing a passable impression of fresh air.

Ayala was a far more experienced climber than Chakotay and it was beginning to show. Chakotay reached for the next handhold, his pride kicking in as he found himself unwilling to let his friend get too far ahead. His communicator chirped.

"_You all right down there, Cap?_"

Chakotay smiled and shook his head as he tapped his badge and said, "Mike, I've been telling you not to call me that for four years now."

"_Sorry,"_ Ayala said, in a tone that gave Chakotay the impression of an unapologetic verbal shrug. "_Old habits die hard. How are you feeling?_"

"Like I'm way too old for this."

"_Naw,"_ said Ayala. "_You've still got it. Anyway, there's a break coming up â€" see?_"

Chakotay tipped his head back, looking up the sun-bleached rock face. Ayala was sitting on a narrow ledge several meters above him. As he watched, the younger man tipped a finger to his forehead. "Good," nodded Chakotay, relieved. "Good."

By the time Chakotay reached the ledge, he was breathing hard and grateful for the chance to take the strain off his arms for a while. Ayala shuffled along a bit, rearranging the guide ropes to give them both a little more room. They said nothing for a few minutes, looking out at the landscape that stretched below them. The forests of Yosemite meandered in all directions, broken up by trails that from this distance looked like veins tracing beneath the uneven skin of the land.

"Not bad, eh?" Ayala asked.

Chakotay nodded. "Not bad."

"It's even better from the top."

"I don't know, Mike. I still just don't get it. This compunction to get to the top. The whole 'I climb it because it's there' thing. It looks just as beautiful from the ground, to me."

Ayala smiled. This was a good-natured argument that they'd had, on and off, for years. "Yeah, well, thanks for coming, especially since I know climbing's not your first choice. You'd rather justâ€| hollow out a log, or something."

Chakotay grinned at the jibe. "Well, it's good to step outside your comfort zone every once in a while." Then he grew more serious. "And today being what it isâ€|"

Mike looked down at the water bottle in his hand. His thumb scrubbed at its lid. "Yeah."

"What birthday is it today? Seven?"

The younger man frowned and sighed, his head dropping. "Yeah. My boy Thomas'll be seven today. Seven! Hell man â€" four years. Where have they gone?"

Chakotay gripped Mike's shoulder. "I know. It must be hard."

Ayala lifted his chin and forced a smile. "Well, at least I was able to send him a message this year. That was something."

Chakotay smiled as he dropped his hand. "What did you say?"

"Just that I loved him and that I missed him. Oh, and that he'd better save me a slice of cake, cos I'll be home sometime soon and I'll be wanting some." Ayala frowned again. "I just wish it had felt less like a lie and more like hope."

"There's always hope, Mike. We will get home. Who knows what we'll encounter next week that could get us back to the Alpha Quadrant?"

Ayala smiled. "That's what I like about you, Cap," he said. "That eternal optimism."

Chakotay's combadge chirped again and Kathryn's voice rose over the slight breeze wheeling around them. _"Captain Janeway to Commander Chakotay."_

"Chakotay here."

"Sorry to bother you on your day off, Commander."

"It's no bother, Captain. What can I do for you?"

There was a pause. When she spoke again, Janeway's voice was full of curiosity. _"Where are you?"_

"Right now? In the holodeck."

"Weren't you planning to go climbing with Ayala? I thought you two were going to scale Half Dome?"

"Yes â€" we are."

"You sound pretty relaxed to me," she said, with a decided hint of teasing in her voice. _"Sure you're not just lazing on the beach in Rio?"_

Chakotay looked out at the landscape and grinned. "We're just taking a break, that's all."

"Right," she said, sounding as if she didn't believe it for a second. _"Well, sorry to interrupt. I just need the latest report from Engineering on the power fluctuation in the warp core. I've got a meeting with B'Elanna about it this afternoon and I want to review

it beforehand. I thought it was on my desk, butâ€¦" _

Chakotay rubbed a hand across his temple. "Ah â€" I'm sorry, that was my fault. I took it back as there were some notes I wanted to add. I did them last night and meant to leave them in the ready room first thing, but forgot. The PADD will be on my desk."

_"No problem, I figured as much. Can I get it?" _

He smiled. "Of course. You don't need to ask permission to go into my office, Kathryn."

_"Just thought it would be polite." _ There was another pause. _"Are you _really_ on Half Dome?" _

"Yes, I really am. Would I lie to you?"

She ignored that. _"Enjoying yourself?" _

He grinned again. "Ask me again tomorrow. Or better yet, the day after."

Janeway laughed. _"I can lend you my quarters for a few hours, if you like. A soak in the tub will probably help. And Chakotay?" _

He answered through another smile. "Yes?"

_"Give Ayala my best, won't you? I'm thinking of him today." _

"I will. Chakotay out."

He looked over to find Ayala watching him. "Did you hear that? Captain Janeway asking about you, I mean?"

Mike blew out a breath as he raised an eyebrow. "Captain Janeway? Don't you meanâ€¦ Kathryn?"

Chakotay kicked himself. He generally tried to avoid calling her by her first name in front of the crew. He took a swig of water and shrugged it off. "It's her name."

"I've never heard you use it before. Don't think I've ever heard anyone use it before." Ayala paused, looking out at the view. "Come to think of it, that must be really weird. No one ever calling you by your actual name. Always being 'Captain' or 'Ma'am'."

"She's never 'Ma'am'," Chakotay pointed out.

"True."

The silence stretched between them.

"She'sâ€¦ got a bathtub in her quarters? I didn't even know there were plans for them in the replicator database."

Chakotay pulled on his ear. "There aren't."

"Then howâ€¦"

"Does it matter?" Chakotay asked, wanting to cut this line of

questioning short. "She's the captain, and I'd say she's earned a few luxuries. Come on, break's over. Let's get going, shall we?"

"You two get on pretty well, don't you?"

"We wouldn't be much of a command team if we didn't."

"Yeah, but â€" you know what I mean."

The first officer sighed. "I don't, actually."

"Hey, come on, man," said his friend. "We used to talk about this stuff, didn't we?"

"What stuff is that?"

Ayala shrugged. "Women. Relationships. Hell, Maria and I probably wouldn't still be together if it wasn't for you."

"Sure you would," Chakotay said, quietly. "You two are meant to be together. Not even 75,000 light years can change that."

Ayala didn't say anything for a moment. They sat, warming their tired muscles in the sun with the beauty of Earth spread out beneath them, thinking of things both too distant and too close to home.

"It's just â€" I haven't seen you with anyone for a while, that's all," Mike said. "I mean, not since Seska. And I know that was a pretty bad time for you, but it's not like you're the kind of guy who usually goes without."

Chakotay tried to ignore the segue his friend was making. "There are different priorities out here, Ayala. I've got other things to worry about. A lot of other things."

"Yeah, but â€" it's been four years, Chakotay. We've been out here for four years, and whatever I tell my kids, whatever I tell Mariaâ€" we might never get home, right? Maybe this is our home, know what I'm saying?"

"No," said Chakotay, although actually, he did. It was the same thing he'd been telling himself for at least two years. "Mike, I don't want to have this conversation, all right?"

"Why not? Come on, Cap, who else are you going to talk to?"

"What makes you think I need to talk to anyone?"

"Well, it seems to me that you're always the one keeping an eye on everyone else, and it makes me wonder who's keeping an eye on you. We're friends, aren't we?"

"Yes, but I'm also your superior officer."

"Sure you are. But you were that in the Maquis, too, and that didn't stop us helping each other out, did it?"

Chakotay frowned. "I just don't know what you think it is that I need help with, Mike. Do I not seem fine to you?"

"You do seem fine. You always seem fine."

"Well, there you are, then."

"But fine isn't happy, Chakotay. You know what happy looks like? It looks like you just did when you were talking to Kathryn Janeway. Right then, you looked happy, and you sounded happy. Hell, so did she. Not just fine, Chakotay. Happy. You should think about that."

Chakotay sighed. "Mike, whatever you're trying to get atâ€¦"

"What I'm getting at is, you should give it a try."

Chakotay felt his eyebrows rise. "'Give it a try?'" he repeated.

"Yeah. Ask her out. Have a date. See where it takes you."

Chakotay actually laughed at that. "Mike, she's the captain."

"So? What's that got to do with anything? You've dated captains before."

It was true. "I wasn't her XO. And we weren't stranded in a distant galaxy."

Ayala shrugged. "The fact that we are is all the more reason that you should."

"No, it's more of a reason that I shouldn't. If it turned bad, what do we do then?"

"You're both adults with higher than average IQ functions. You'd deal with it. Come on, Chakotay. That's no excuse."

"I can't believe we're having this conversation. In fact, we're not having this conversation. That's it. It's over. Let's climb."

"I can't believe we haven't had this conversation before. I'm an idiot. I can't believe it's taken me this long to work out what's right in front of my face."

Chakotay shook his head. "You're seeing things that aren't there, Mike."

"No," Ayala said, with such firmly quiet conviction that Chakotay looked straight at him. "I'm not."

The silence settled between them again and in it Chakotay felt a weight pressing down on his shoulders that he'd been ignoring for a long time. He'd forgotten what it felt like to be able to hand that weight off for a while. He frowned, focussing on a distant point on the horizon.

"It's not me, all right?" He said, eventually. "I'm not the one holding back."

To his credit, Ayala simply nodded and waited for him to continue.

"It's not going to happen while we're in command together. It's as simple as that."

"Okay," said Mike. He let the silence drift for a minute. Then he said, "at the risk of sounding like a throwbackâ€ she's not the only woman on the ship. "

Chakotay looked down at his hands and slowly traced his lifeline with his thumb. "I know."

"That bad?"

Chakotay looked up and was relieved to see no trace of pity on the younger man's face, only understanding. "Just one of those things."

Mike sighed, and then said, "Mind if I ask you a question?"

"All right. One. And then we start climbing again. I want to get some rest in before my next shift. Deal?"

"Deal. When did you start calling her Kathryn?"

Chakotay smiled. "Couple of years ago."

Ayala nodded. "It was on that planet, wasn't it? The one where the two of you were stranded." At Chakotay's nod, he added, "Makes sense. Soâ€ what else happened?"

Chakotay shook his head. "We had a deal, remember? One question - and I've already given you an extra." He pulled on the guide rope and inched back into a stand, preparing to climb again. Beside him, Ayala did the same. "You want to go first?"

"Naw," Mike drawled. "I'd just overtake you anyway. Age before beauty, right?"

"Thanks a lot."

"You're welcome. Why are you avoiding my question?"

"I'm not. We had a deal!" Chakotay found his first hand hold and began pulling himself up.

"Oh noâ€ wait," he heard Ayala say behind him, his friend's voice back to its teasing timbre. "Wait just one minute. You didn't â€" you didn't tell her one of your _stories_, did you? Cos, oh man, if you did â€" well, then I've just got nothing for you."

Chakotay smiled and found his next foothold.

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